

Session 1

Infinite Awe and Finite Religion

Again and again I meet people who want to live a Spirit life, but want nothing to do with established religion. I understand this feeling, for I, too, have found the typical religious organization to be more of an obstruction than a means of accessing our Spirit lives. Nevertheless, I want to defend the role of religion in human life and make a case for the importance of religious transformation.

Like economics and politics, religion is an unavoidable and necessary social process. Religion is that social process that has to do with giving expression to Spirit. And what is Spirit? Spirit is Awe. And what is Awe? Awe is a state of dread that is also fascination and entails the courage to open ourselves to this basic intensity. Also, Awe is an encounter with the Eternally Awesome, the Ground of our Being. The inward aspect of this experience we call "Awe," and the surrounding Majesty of Being we can call "the Awesome." Without the Awesome there is no Awe, and without the Awe there is no experience of the Awesome. In Christianity this polarity appears as the Almighty and the Holy Spirit. There are many states of Awe (many aspects of Holy Spirit). Humanity has given these states names like: Trust, Love, Freedom, the Peace that is beyond understanding, and the Joy unspeakable. Religion not only gives finite expression to these Eternal states of Spirit; religious practices also assist us in maturing our Spirit living. Awe/Spirit is like a wild wind blowing through our finite lives. Good religion is like a sail that can catch the wind of Spirit but the sail must not be confused with the Wind. No religion ever catches the whole of the Wind. Religion is finite; this Wind is Infinite.

Religion is a social process, and all social processes are finite and transient, including Christianity. All religion is an earthly, fragile, and pervertible reality. No religion can claim absolute certainty. No religion has a scripture written by an Infinite authority. No religious form is immune from becoming obsolete and thus no longer capable of serving the expression of Spirit. So every religion has its perversions.

Religious perversions have often become greater than perversions in economics or politics or any other aspect of social life. In some moments of history, the dismantling of bad religion and the construction of good religion have been the most important aspect of progressive social change. This was surely the case in the 16th century of Western society when Martin Luther and others set the Protestant Reformation in motion. The period of history that Karl Jaspers named "the Axial period" was also a period in which there were major social transformations stemming from an upheaval in the religious processes of those societies: the teaching of the Buddha in India; Lao Tzu and Confucius in China; the major prophets in Palestine; Zoroastrianism in Persia; the Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian transformations in Greece.

Jesus, remembered as the Messiah, and Mohammed's oral teachings represent two more mountain peaks in the history of religion on this planet. Thousands of other figures also bear witness to Spirit and to this core choice: to identify with Spirit or to refuse to do so. Spirit is an ever-present actuality in human life, and that is why every society has developed religion as an integral part of its fabrics. The role of healthy religion is to express Spirit and to discover how living a Spirit-committed life can take form in a particular historical setting.

Obsolete Religion

Today, every religious tradition is challenged to move away from obsolete religious metaphors, practices, and organizations. For example, modern physics and scientific cosmology have rendered an ancient and widely-used religious metaphor obsolete. We

sometimes call it “the transcendence metaphor” or “the two-story universe,” a “higher” realm – a place where God dwells or perhaps where all sorts of gods, angels, and devils dwell. It is understandable why humanity has found this metaphor useful; Spirit is an experience that seems to be from somewhere beyond ordinary life. But transcendence has become an obsolete metaphor. Our scientific knowledge renders incredible a literal “universe next door.” As citizens of a contemporary scientific culture, we know that there is no “up there,” “over there,” or “out there.” Even if we can theorize about other universes, we cannot experience them; so they have no personal meaning in our lives. Talk of that other realm – its angels and demons, its heaven and hell – is difficult for us, particularly if we are asked to take them literally. But even if we know that this two-story talk is metaphorical, pointing to something we might experience, we still have trouble with using this language. It does not link well with the language we use for the rest of our lives.

The obsolescence or “death” of this two-story language does not mean that this language was not useful for people before it had its cultural death. For maybe 100,000 years, this double-deck picture organized the customary way to talk about the Spirit life. Moses, Amos, Jesus, Paul, John, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Wesley, (as well as Jews, Muslims, and others) were not less bright or less aware of Spirit actuality than any of us living today. They merely spoke a different metaphorical language.

Our religious-renewal job is not to shame the two-story myths as ignorance, but to translate them into language we can understand without changing what the original users of this language were attempting to say. We can no longer talk meaningfully about Spirit as an invasion from some other universe. But we can talk meaningfully about Spirit as a relationship with an Infinite Actuality that shines through each finite process. Let's call this “the transparency metaphor.” The Awesome shines through all finite processes and thereby awakens Awe in the inner life of human beings. The metaphor of transparency can do for us today what the metaphor of transcendence did for humanity for so many thousands of years. Below is an example of a piece of familiar Christian heritage translated from transcendence metaphor to transparency metaphor:

A Metaphorical Translation of the Model Prayer

given by Jesus according to Matthew 6: 9-13

Our Father who art in heaven.

Oh Infinite Silence, our devotional Thou, our Primal Parent,

Hallowed be Thy name

May we honor Your nameless awesomeness.

Thy Kingdom Come

May we open ourselves to whatever future You will bring to us and our planet.

Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven

May we accept the past and also the present situation of limits and possibilities as Your good gift to us in this real down-to-Earth moment.

Give us this day our daily bread

We ask no more than what we need for today's living.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

We ask for forgiveness for our malice, our bondage, and our self-inflicted despair, and we ask that we be similarly forgiving toward all our companions.

*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil*

Guard us from the lure of unreality and deliver us from a life of despair.

*For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory Forever.*

For Yours, Oh Final Reality, is the Rule that rules all things, the primal Power that none can defeat, and the Glory of fulsome joy meant for us all from the beginning and for all time to come.

A Major Cultural Shift

This shift from the two-story or transcendence religious metaphor to the transparency metaphor is a major cultural shift – arguably more major than the Copernican revolution or the Einsteinian revolution in modern physics. Though important, this shift from transcendence to transparency is only a shift in the finite fabrics of religion. The new metaphor, like the old one, is a finite human creation vulnerable to misuse, corruption, and wearing out. Also, our use of this new religious metaphor does not make us better than the ancients. Our actual experience of the Infinite Presence is the same as it was for Moses or Jesus or Buddha or Mohammed. But we cannot go back. Using the transparency metaphor simply means living in our own times. In our day if we continue using the transcendence metaphor (especially when we do not acknowledge that it is a metaphor), we create illusory religion, religion that suppresses rather than expresses Spirit.

Also, hanging on to the transcendence metaphor includes hanging on to hierarchical religion. Transcendence and hierarchy are companion metaphors. The Divine-above-nature is a unity of thought with society-above-nature and kings-above-peasants. This above-and-below modeling in religious matters supports the oppression of nature by human society and the oppression of the poor and powerless by the rich and powerful.

Furthermore, in conservative or reactionary religious communities, the transcendence metaphor is taken as a literal truth. Literal truth, in our present understanding of it, is a product of the scientific revolution. Literalism is a modern invention. It may seem that Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and others viewed the transcendent metaphor literally, but that is misleading. For all those thousands of years before the modern age, the two-story talk about Spirit experience was simply how people talked about existential or Spirit matters. We now have a new way to talk if we are to make sense to ourselves and others.

In addition, the transparency metaphor assists us in affirming that nature is not a lower reality; rather, the transparency metaphor allows us to affirm nature as that reality through which and only through which the Spirit relationship with the Infinite Presence is taking place. It is in the specific space/time events of actual living that we meet the Infinite, and nowhere else. If we speak of meeting the Infinite Word in the words of the Bible, it is only because we are hearing the Bible speak of meeting the Infinite in the actual events of our current lives. This perspective frees the Spirit person from any need to take an ascetic relationship to his or her own mind and body or to avoid appreciation for the rich flourishing of nature. Rather, being our Spirit being supports a wholehearted affirmation of our own minds and bodies and of the surrounding natural world. Our mind, body, Earth, and the cosmos as a whole are finite processes that mediate our conscious relationship with the Infinite Presence. All of nature is made “holy” (i.e., Awe-filled) by the Presence of the Infinite streaming through nature toward that Awe-awareness which is the depth of being human.

Finally, The transparency metaphor also helps us fight the temptation to talk about

our own particular religion as having been sent down from “heaven” and thus be the true dogma that we must defend from all other religions. Every religion can be understood as a fragmentary, human, finite, and perpetually changing process. In this regard, religion is not different from every other social process. As paradoxical as this may sound, good religion is a finite social process inspired by the Infinite Presence and designed to give expression to the Deathless Spirit of relating to the Infinite Presence.

Religion, so understood, need not be tied to hierarchical forms of organization. Religion that has rejected the transcendence metaphor and embraced the transparency metaphor can set aside hierarchical organization as well. We no longer need to impose dogma from the top down and wait for the constituency to find its Spirit meaning. Rather, we involve our constituencies in the Spirit-discovery process and in the process of creating rational forms that express Spirit. In the transparency mode of religious formation, religious reflection and organization are wedded to the mysterious, ever-surprising insurgence of fresh Spirit. Such religion can give order to our experience of Spirit and give discipline to our religious lives without asking us to bow down to some authoritarian dogma. In the transparency mode of religious formation, our religious ordering will be constantly undone and redone by the ever-surprising blowing of the wind of Spirit. We know that our religious forms do not and cannot fully contain the Spirit they aim to express. We know that it is Spirit that is deathless; our religious forms are temporal, fragmentary, and passing.

In the context of the transparency mode of religious formation, a true religious tolerance can be practiced. Once we no longer have any reason to believe in one true doctrine or one true practice of religion, then we can be fully tolerant toward other religious lineages. If we have to defend our correct dogma, we cannot genuinely share the gifts of our Christian heritage with members of other religions nor allow them to share their gifts with us.

As long as we are able to view Spirit as primary and religion as secondary, we need not demean other heritages in order to affirm our own. And we need not demean our own religious heritage because it is not perfect. Furthermore, we need not shrink from admitting the weaknesses and horrendous perversions that have grown up in our own religious heritage. Directly experienced Spirit provides us the standing place from which we can evaluate those perversions and enact some genuine repentance that leads toward honest religious renewal.

Further, we can passionately give ourselves to religious renewal, while remaining modest about what we are doing. As religious reformers we are simply repairing one finite social process among the many social processes of humanity. We are doing so in order to experience and communicate deathless Spirit more adequately. But however deep our Spirit communication, our religious forms are fragile. Such fragility characterizes every religious tradition in all its past, present, and future forms. The awareness of religious fragility and an appropriate religious modesty go together.

Putting Spirit before religion loosens us from the past and supports our religious creativity. When we are no longer stuck in inherited forms that must be defended with our last ounce of blood, we can be open to create fresh and more powerful expressions of Spirit. That is, we can create religion. We can identify with the Buddha and with Jesus and others who have clearly dared to create religion. If we are Christians, we can stand in the shoes of Paul and Mark and Matthew and Luke and John and see that these amazingly creative persons were building fresh religious practice with every word they wrote. They were not robotic tools in the sway of a Divine Writer. They were ordinary persons, not unlike ourselves, who were inspired with Spirit and who were creative as a result of this inspiration. In every religious heritage we notice examples of this fantastic creativity that Spirit releases. When we answer the call of living our Spirit being, we become participants in this vast story of religious creativity.

Poetry can often get closer to awakening Spirit awareness than discursive thought. Here is a poem that summarizes much of what has been said above and underlines once again that religion is a social process, a finite social process that points beyond itself to Infinite Spirit.

Religion is Not a Private Matter

Religion is not a private matter.
Religion is a sociological process.

Spirit is not a sociological process.
Spirit is only known in the secret solitude
of singular persons.

Yet Spirit is not a private matter either.
For Spirit is expressed in public
through outward acts of
freedom and compassion.
Flight from Spirit is expressed in public
through outward acts of
despair, self absorption, and destruction.

If Spirit blows in you,
you are the light of the world.
Do not put your lamp under a washtub
but on a lamp stand
so it will illuminate the house.

Spirit is the same in every age,
but religion changes.
Religion is created by the human family.
Religion is part of human society.

Spirit is not a creation of the human mind or body.
Spirit is not an achievement of the human will.
Spirit is not a perfected personality.
Spirit is a wild gift, like blood, like air.
Spirit is human authenticity
breathed by the Infinite Silence
into our finite processes of body and mind.

Bodies and minds do religion.
Spirit inspires bodies and minds.
Spirit fills the biological processes
of human beings.
Spirit is a bridge of relationship
between human biology and the Wholly Other
--the emptiness--the NO-THING-NESS from which
all things come and to which all things return
--the fullness--the EVERY-THING-NESS
in which all things cohere.

Spirit is not a finite process.
Good religion is a finite process
that expresses Spirit.
Bad religion is a finite process
that only pretends to express Spirit
while providing means of escaping
from being and living Spirit.

Nevertheless, Spirit is inescapable,
even though escaping from Spirit
is the general condition of humanity.
And since escaping from the inescapable
is a futile journey,
humanity is not happy.
Indeed, despair is the general condition
of the human family.

The despairing only occasionally notice
that they are in despair,
for to notice despair
is the first step toward
moving away from despair.

To be stuck at this first step
of noticing despair
is intolerable.
So most noticers of despair
take a step backwards into hiding
despair from view
rather than a step forward
toward leaving behind the
understandings and commitments
that are causing the despair.

The unhappiness of despair
is rooted in some specific way
of not being willing to be Spirit.
Happiness is the state of willing to be
the Spirit relationship we are,
being that bridge between our wondrous
biology
and the Wholly Other
--the emptiness--the NO-THING-NESS
from which all things come
and to which all things return
--the fullness--the EVERY-THING-NESS
in which all things cohere.

And all this is not a private matter.
Every leaf and every hair
of the biological world
is involved in this public act
of choosing to be the Spirit beings
that we are.